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In a multicase study, adolescents at five culturally diverse sites across the United States engaged in face-to-face interactions as they reflected and reported on their perceptions of their own and other students' experiences in discussing regularly assigned content area texts. A social constructionist perspective provided the framework for the research. Data sources included three rounds of videotaped class discussions followed by three focal group interviews, field notes, theoretical memoranda, and student artifacts. Data collections and analysis were ongoing over the course of one school year. A procedure for involving the researchers at all five sites in analyzing common sets of data generated findings that suggest students are: (1) aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to good discussions; (2) knowledgeable about the different tasks and topics that influence their participation; and (3) cognizant of how classroom discussion helps them understand what they read. By focusing on students' insights into their own actions, thoughts, and motives related to classroom talk about texts, it was possible to make visible their negotiation of different roles and relations, rights and responsibilities, and norms and expectations in peer-led and whole class discussions. (Contains 45 references, 3 figures, and 2 tables of data. An appendix presents a narrative vignette.) (Author/RS)

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Note. This report can be used with a videotape entitled *Reader's Social, Cognitive, and Motivational Development in Varied Group Discussion Structures*, which shows students in Dera Weaver's classroom discussing regularly assigned materials in groups of their own choosing. To obtain a copy of this videotape, please write: Donna Alvermann, National Reading Research Center, University of Georgia, 318 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602-7125.

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Abstract. *In this multicase study, adolescents at five culturally diverse sites across the United States engaged in face-to-face interactions as they reflected and reported on their perceptions of their own and other students' experiences in discussing regularly assigned content area texts. A social constructionist perspective provided the framework for the research. Data sources included three rounds of videotaped class discussions followed by three focal group interviews, field notes, theoretical memoranda, and student artifacts. Data collections and analysis were ongoing over the course of one school year. A procedure for involving the researchers at all five sites in analyzing common sets of data generated*

findings that suggest students are (a) aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to good discussions, (b) knowledgeable about the different tasks and topics that influence their participation, and (c) cognizant of how classroom discussion helps them understand what they read. By focusing on students' insights into their own actions, thoughts, and motives related to classroom talk about texts, it was possible to make visible their negotiation of different roles and relations, rights and responsibilities, and norms and expectations in peer-led and whole-class discussions.

Although, as literacy teachers and researchers, each of the authors has been involved with classroom discussions of text over the past several years, we have rarely considered in any systematic way how students might be experiencing such discussions. Granted, there have been a number of studies focusing on classroom discourse (Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1971; Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Cazden, 1986) and more specifically on what teachers do and say in interacting with students to motivate them to engage in literate actions with their peers (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Dillon, 1989; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992). These studies, coupled with the rapidly growing body of research on peer-led, literaturebased discussions at the elementary and intermediate level (Almasi & Gambrell, 1994; McMahon, 1991; O'Flahavan & Almasi, 1991; Raphael & Goatley, 1992), have contributed greatly to our awareness of how classroom talk about texts can be viewed as a window on students' thinking and social interactions. In fact, it is largely through reading this literature that we came to appreciate how the social, cognitive, and motivational aspects of classroom talk are intertwined and often analytically inseparable.

At the same time, we have become acutely aware of how much more there is to learn about students' subjective views about their own actions, thoughts, and motives that arise during classroom talk about assigned readings. Although a review of the literature on students' perceptions of classroom practices (Frager, 1984; Taylor, 1962) and schooling in general (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992) suggests that researchers have studied these phenomena for a number of years, there is little evidence that they have placed students' experiences at the center of their research (see McLaughlin & Talbert, 1990, and Turley, 1994, for exceptions). According to Erickson and Shultz (1992),

> If the student is visible at all in a research study, he is usually viewed from the perspective of . . . educators' interests and ways of seeing . . . . Rarely is the perspective of the student herself explored. Classroom research typically does not ask what the student is up to, nor does it . . . question whether "failing" or "mastering" or being "unmotivated" . . . adequately captures what the student might be about in daily classroom encounters with curriculum. (pp. 467–468)

In the research literature on adolescent literacy, we are aware of at least one longitudinal study (Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993) that focused on middle and high school students' perceptions of their own reasons for being (or not being) motivated as literacy learners. Two other studies involving adoles-

cents and literacy (Hinchman, 1992; Rogers, 1991) described the subjective nature of students' knowing and how such knowledge altered students' attitudes about learning from text. Although each of these studies addressed adolescents' literate ways of knowing in content-area classes, none focused specifically on how students' subjectively experienced discussions of assigned readings in those classes.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to learn from middle- and high-school students' perspectives how they experience classroom talk about texts in their content-area classes. Classroom talk is our descriptor for the various forms of student-to-student verbal interaction that we observed; however, students uniformly referred to all kinds of classroom talk about texts as discussions. A multicase study involving five sites across the United States allowed us to look at such discussions in culturally diverse settings, not for the purpose of making evaluative judgments across sites, but rather for understanding in greater depth the range of students' experiences. The significance of the study lies in its potential to affect how teachers use what students value about discussions in planning their instruction.

Conceptual Framework

Over a half century ago, Dewey (1938/1963) argued that the proper interpretation of students' educational experiences rests on one's ability to understand their thoughts, actions, and motives as they interact with others in social situations. Although he acknowledged the role of the teacher and the curriculum in shaping students' experiences, Dewey wrote, "[it is] the total *social* set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged" (p. 45) that is most important in interpreting his or her experiences.

Building on the ideas of Dewey, Kuhn (1970), and others, Rorty (1979) has given even more credence to the importance of "the social" in interpreting one's experiences. Rorty (1979) deconstructs the metaphor of the human mind consisting of two mechanisms: one, the so-called mirror of nature that reflects external reality, and the other, an inner eye that comprehends the reflection. He does so on the grounds that this metaphor, which has influenced Western philosophy since the time of Descartes, leads to circular thinking about knowledge and to some unresolvable problems in accurately representing the nature and authority of knowledge. In place of the mirror and inner eye metaphor, Rorty would have us consider what can be learned from viewing knowledge as a social construct. His thesis is that all knowledge is socially constructed, such that the ways in which we come to describe or otherwise account for the world (including ourselves and our experiences) are derived from historically situated linguistic and symbolic interactions with others.

Thus, one of the assumptions underlying social constructionism[1] is that linguistic "entities

[1]Although *constructionism* and *constructivism* are sometimes used interchangeably, we prefer the former term to avoid possible confusions. According to Gergen (1985), *constructivism* "is also used in reference to Piagetian theory, to a form of perceptual theory, and to a significant movement in 20th century art" (p. 266).

we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on[2] are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers" (Bruffee, 1986, p. 774) over time. Based on this view of knowledge as socially justified belief, which constitutes and is constituted by a community's language system, social constructionists like Rorty (1979) and Geertz (1983a) have reasoned that knowledge and language are inseparable. The inseparability of the two was a particularly useful construct for us in our quest to understand how students say they experience classroom discussions of assigned readings. As a construct, it provided the rationale for asking students to reflect and report on their subjective experiences as participants in small and large group discussions. We assumed students' knowledge of such experiences (constructed as it was through the social interaction of group members) and the language they used to reflect that knowledge were inseparable. This assumption addresses in part the limitations typically ascribed to self-report data[3]. At the same time, we recognize "that what we call our data are really our own constructions" (Geertz, 1983b, p. 42).

We chose a social constructionist perspective to guide our research because we were interested in exploring how verbal and nonverbal patterned ways of interacting *shape* and are *shaped by* (Fairclough, 1993) social practices inherent in classroom talk about texts (e.g., ways of negotiating and being together, ways of positioning and being positioned, and ways of participating and not participating in discussions). A social constructionist approach also provided a rationale for methodologically grounding our observations in the talk and actions of the students. This approach to understanding adolescents' experiences, while different from the approach taken by many motivation theorists (e.g., Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles & Midgley, 1989), is in keeping with the recent work of McCombs (in press), who is attempting to integrate what students say about their learning experiences with the more traditional research on motivation.

As students socially interact to construct meaning during discussions of their assigned readings, they make visible what is available to be known (Bloome & Bailey, 1992) as well as a host of literate actions for how they come to know (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992). One distinguishing feature of these actions and interactions is how students negotiate different roles and relations, rights and responsibilities, and norms and expectations as they engage with texts (Floriani, 1994; Heras, 1994). In the present study, we used the negotiation process as a heuristic for examining students' perspectives on how they experience class discussions of assigned readings. Specifically, we drew on the work of Green and Harker (1982), Heras (1994), and Heap (1991) to formulate general types of questions that guided and were refined with our research. Initially, these questions included: What roles and relationships influence how students per-

[2]Here, we would include class discussions as well.

[3]As noted by Goetz and LeCompte (1984), "self-reports are useful for assessing how individuals make judgments about people and events, and they do register what people think they do or what they think is socially acceptable to do" (p. 122).

ceive their participation in classroom talk about texts? For what do they hold each other accountable? What expectations do they hold for such discussions? As we gained insights into the students' perspectives, we refined our questions in an inductive manner. This process sensitized us to the nuances present in students' responses to our current questions and enabled us to ask increasingly more focused questions about negotiated roles and relationships, expectations, and accountability.

Method

This section begins with our rationale for choosing a multicase study approach, followed by a brief overview of the researchers' backgrounds and roles. Next is a description of the classes at each of the five sites, and then a listing of the primary and secondary data sources. The section concludes with an account of the procedures used in analyzing the data.

Multicase Study Approach

Capturing with some degree of specificity the nature of students' experiences of a particular phenomenon, such as classroom talk about texts, is labor intensive and frequently limited to a single case at one site. We chose to study multiple cases at different sites because we were interested in obtaining as broad a view as possible of students' perceptions of how they experience text-based discussions. We recognize that in taking this broad view, we limited our ability to attend to the richness of individual sites.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the degree to which a multicase study can be used to demonstrate the typicality or diversity of the phenomenon under study rests ultimately on the kinds of decisions made in choosing the various sites. In selecting the sites for the present study, we followed Stake's (1994) rule of thumb that the opportunity to learn from a site should take priority over a concern for its typicality or representativeness. Consequently, we chose sites that provided an opportunity to study students' experiences of text-based discussions under a variety of conditions (e.g., peer-led, small-group discussions and teacher-led, large-group discussions) across culturally diverse settings. It is important to note that we sampled only a limited number of classrooms. Each of the classrooms used different kinds of approaches to small- and large-group discussion. Across all sites, students told us that they were allowed to participate in discussion for only a limited amount of time each day—often only in the classroom where the case study took place.

Researchers' Backgrounds and Roles

All eight coauthors were experienced educators at the middle- and/or high-school levels. Five of us (DA, KH, DM, SP, JY[4]) were university-based researchers and three (ET, DW, PZ)

[4] With the exception of the study's coauthors, all other individuals and schools throughout the manuscript are referred to by their pseudonums. The research team, which consisted of the eight coauthors, included one African American woman, five European American women, and two European American men.

were school-based researchers. Although common experiences as teachers contributed to our working well as a team, each of us brought slightly different stances to the research project. For example, Donna Alvermann viewed students as the insiders and experts on how they experienced classroom talk about texts. This view, coupled with her belief that all knowledge is socially constructed, led to Donna's stance on valuing the role of students in reflecting and reporting on their own experiences as discussants. Josephine Young's belief that students are a valuable source of information was heavily influenced by her previous experiences teaching literacy at an alternative high school, where she came to appreciate how knowledgeable students are about their own learning experiences.

Kathleen Hinchman brought a stance informed by her experiences as a middle-school reading specialist. As a researcher trained in symbolic interaction, Kathleen was concerned with understanding meaning from the students' perspective, but she also respected the teacher (Patricia Zalewski) as the primary orchestrator of classroom events. Patricia's concern as a social studies teacher was focused on her students' ability to comprehend the content-heavy global studies curriculum, which was mandated by the state. Educated also as a reading specialist, Patricia found herself in a never-ending conflict between loyalty to content and to students' understanding.

Having taught junior and senior high school students, David Moore had vivid personal memories of discussions that resulted in some of the highest highs and lowest lows of his teaching. His experiences with discussions led to his stance that they were an extremely powerful, yet unpredictable, means of instruction. Stephen Phelps was conducting a yearlong professional development program at Thomas Jefferson High School during the time he was involved in the multicase study. This led to his stance on the importance of learning as much as possible about the interpersonal relations among students, faculty, and administrators at his site.

Twenty-nine years of teaching elementary and middle school language arts in a large urban area of the southeastern United States led Esther Thrash to her stance. She believed discussions and small group work helped her students to understand the assigned readings and to think critically. Also a teacher of middle school language arts, Dera Weaver had long noted students' preference for discussion over most other modes of response to literature. Her stance was influenced by a belief in the potential of peer-led discussions for eliciting engaged reading and authentic response and by a curiosity concerning the teacher's role in such discussions.

Our research roles differed to some extent at the various sites. For example, a collaborative arrangement existed between school-based researchers and university-based researchers at three of the five sites. Dera, Donna, and Josephine shared responsibilities for collecting and analyzing data during the six-month collaboration in Dera's classroom. Dera maintained responsibility for planning and facilitating class discussions, while Donna and Josephine did all of the taping and interviewing and were responsible for distributing the tapes and transcripts to the other sites. A similar collaboration existed in Esther's class, except that Donna and Josephine were involved for only four

months due to an unforeseen delay in gaining school district approval for the case study. The 8-month collaboration between Patricia and Kathleen closely paralleled the one in Dera's classroom. Initially, Patricia kept a teaching journal that included her reactions to students' discussions, whereas Dera met with Donna and Josephine during the class period immediately following each observed discussion. At the other two sites, less involved relationships developed between teachers and university-based researchers during the eight-month long case studies. For example, Alan Williams did not become a formal member of the research team, but he did read Stephen's transcriptions of the videotaped discussions and focal group interviews. Like Alan, Paula Freeman did not participate as a teacher researcher, although she conferred regularly with David, the university-based researcher.

A strength of this multicase study was the opportunity for all of us, from our various backgrounds and stances toward research, to talk together about what we heard students saying about their perceptions. The chance to view videotapes of text-based discussions from within and across sites and to read transcripts of students talking about their perceptions of those discussions added to the richness of the data. In fact, it was this layering of data that led to some of the more interesting research team meetings.

Participants and Sites

This section includes descriptions of the participating classes (arranged alphabetically by teachers' last names) and the locations of the five sites. It also provides information on how the focal students were selected.

Paul Freeman's class. Paula taught a twelfth-grade advanced placement English class of 13 seniors and served as head of the English Department at Camak High School (CHS) in the greater Phoenix area. The 4 males and 9 females in her class were from Hispanic, Asian, African American, and European American backgrounds. The student population at CHS was 60% Hispanic, with Spanish spoken frequently in the hallways and lunchroom. Gang activity from the community was discouraged in school; however, the gangs made their presence known by the graffiti on the outside walls. When Paula's class was asked how to designate the focal students, one suggestion was made, and it was not challenged. The suggestion was to include the whole class. This plan was accepted because the class was small and quite verbal according to Paula. The students, whose attendance was sporadic, were especially lively at the beginnings and endings of class; they were serious and compliant during class.

Esther Thrash's class. Esther's eighth-grade heterogeneous language arts class was made up of 23 female and 5 male African American students from the west side of Atlanta, Georgia. The class was representative of the ethnic heritage of the approximately 1,000 students attending Greenwood Middle School, 99% of whom were from African American backgrounds and 1% from European American descent. Discipline was not viewed as a major problem in this working-class neighborhood school that has won district-wide oratorical contests. Esther's students worked in peer-led groups on the average of three times a week.

The six focal students (1 male and 5 females) who served as team captains for their groups were chosen by Esther because of their potential leadership ability and their ability to keep order, command attention, and manage the group.

Dera Weaver's class. Dera taught at Halford Middle School, one of three middle schools in a southern university town. There are approximately 850 students enrolled at Halford, 55% of whom are of European American descent. Although the other 45% of the student body is comprised mostly of African American students, there is a small percentage of students from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds. Dera's class was part of the state's program for gifted students, in which each school is expected to provide some time during the school day for these students to receive an accelerated, differentiated curriculum. At Halford, students identified as gifted were served through their language arts classes, and Dera chose to use a reading/writing workshop approach with her students. The majority of the 14 students in her class were European American, with 2 African American students, 1 Chinese student, 1 Canadian student, and 1 student from Guyana. Although all had been identified as gifted students, all were not fluent or eager readers and writers. All 14 class members served as focal students because Dera did not want anyone to feel left out or privileged.

Alan Williams' class. Alan's eleventh-grade U.S. History class consisted of 18 students ranging in age from 17 to 22 years. The 11 males and 7 females were from Latino, African American, Arabic, Vietnamese, European American, and Ukrainian backgrounds. The class was representative of the larger cultural mix of Thomas Jefferson High School (TJHS), which is located in Buffalo, New York. TJHS serves most of the city's newly arrived high school-age immigrants. The student body is roughly 40-50% Hispanic and 15-20% African American. Students come from as many as 32 different countries, representing at least 13 different languages; 43% of the students do not speak English as their primary language. Although the students in Alan's class were encouraged to work together (and on occasion they attempted peer-led discussions), the dominant mode of instruction was teacher-led discussion/recitation. Students were required to do no homework and very little reading. Alan gave quizzes every 2 to 3 weeks after first going over the questions in class and telling students the answers. Focal students (3 males and 1 female) were selected from those in the class who were 18 years of age or older and were willing to participate.

Patricia Zalewski's class. Patricia taught tenth-grade global studies in a suburban northeastern school district that serves about 10,000 students, with roughly 2,800 of them enrolled in Middlesex High School. Of the 22 students in Patricia's class (10 males and 12 females), 2 were of African American heritage and the rest of European American descent. The curriculum and final examination were dictated by state-wide requirements and designed for academically oriented students who were preparing to enter college. Peer-led discussions were used two to three times a week by midyear to enhance students' understandings of the concepts Patricia introduced through lectures and assigned readings. Six focal students (3 males and 3 females) were selected for their

potential to inform the study and because they shared a common free period; however, due to changes in schedules, absenteeism, and school attrition, most of the focal group interview data came from 4 students.

Data Sources

Like Erickson and Shultz (1992), we believed that "on the topic of student experience, students themselves are the ultimate insiders and experts" (p. 480). Consequently, we enlisted their help in reflecting and reporting on their own and other students' experiences as discussants. Three rounds of videotaped class discussions, followed by three focal group interviews, served as the primary data sources. Field notes (supplemented by transcriptions of audiotaped class discussions), theoretical memoranda, site descriptions, and student artifacts were treated as secondary data sources.

Primary data sources. At each site, the researchers videotaped (and later transcribed) three discussions, one at the beginning, middle, and end of their case. Structured focal group interviews followed each of these tapings. In the focal groups, students viewed segments of the discussions in which they had taken part, and then they responded orally to the researcher's interview questions (see Figure 1).

Questions for an interview protocol were negotiated by the research team from a variety of information sources, including our initial research questions, insights gained from early participant observation field notes, and our experiences in eliciting talk from students. The interview protocol served as a guide to what was often a wide ranging conversation, with interviewer and focal students invited to elaborate and probe as needed to clarify understandings. All focal group interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Prior to the third focal group interview, representative segments from each site's videotaped discussions were shared across sites so that students could observe and comment on discussions from sites other than their own (see Interview #3 in Figure 1).

Secondary data sources. So that we could gain insight into each others' backgrounds and points of view, teachers and researchers wrote beginning theoretical memoranda in response, but not limited to, this common set of prompts: What are your views of reading (including purposes for reading, how reading develops, and the teacher's role in content reading instruction)? What does a good text-based discussion entail? What are the students' and teachers' roles in a good discussion, and how does reading fit?

To provide a rich base in which to ground understanding of our classroom sites, researchers took field notes as they observed weekly discussions at each site. In addition, discussions in Dera's class were audiotaped and transcribed in order to amass a set of data that would provide a rich context for confirming and qualifying cross-site interview and observation data. Artifacts, such as student work, texts, and discussion guides were collected or described for all classrooms when these helped to explain class discussions or contexts for the discussions. Field notes, transcripts, and artifact descriptions were circulated among researchers at each site as our data collection and analysis proceeded.

Focal Group Interview #1

1. What do you think about the discussion you just viewed?
2. How did the discussion help you to understand the topic?
   (If it did not help, what could have been done to make it helpful?)
3. What is it about *you* that made you participate the way you did during the discussion?
4. Describe how the discussion motivated you to think about the topic.
   (If it did not, how could it have encouraged you?)
5. Describe how the discussion encouraged you to read about the subject.
   (If it did not, how could it have encouraged you?)
6. What is it about (supply the names of other focal students) that made them participate the way they did?
7. Suppose I (or a new student) wanted you to join your group discussion. What should I (he or she) do or how should I (he or she) act in order to fit in?

Focal Group Interview #2

Questions 1-7 (see above) plus:

8. How has our presence in the room affected the way you participate in discussions?
9. Why do you think your teacher encourages you to discuss?
10. How do you feel about being observed?

Focal Group Interview #3

Questions 1-10 (see above) plus:

11. How is the discussion you just viewed of your own group *similar* to that of the discussion in Mr./Mrs. _____'s room?
12. How is the discussion you just viewed of your own group *different* from that of the discussion in Mr./Mrs. _____'s room?
13. Do you think that you'd have to act differently to participate successfully in the discussion you just viewed? How so?
14. Based on all you've seen and know, what is your definition of a discussion?

Figure 1. Three Sets of Focal Group Interview Questions

Analysis Procedures

Establishing the beginning and ending boundaries of the phenomenon under study was one of the first priorities for the research team. We used the procedure outlined in Zaharlick and Green (1991) to establish boundaries for what came to be called a *discussion event*. Because we were interested in how students experienced classroom talk about texts and the social settings for that talk, we defined the boundaries of a discussion event in a way that optimized the amount of time we could observe students interacting with other students. A

Phases	Dates	Communication	Individual and Team Tasks	Outcomes/Products
I. Introductions and preliminary design issues	June–August, 1993	• Memoranda • Two 2½-hour-long team conference calls • Individual follow-up phone calls • Faxes • Electronic mail	• Become acquainted as a team • Define individual interests and how they relate to project objectives • Explore grounds for a common methodology • Establish tentative timeline for project • Exchange professional articles on research topic • Design first draft of interview and survey questions • Begin negotiating collaborations with teachers • Begin obtaining permission to enter school sites	• Written synopses of each conference call • Written synopses of each team member's progress between conference calls • Written feedback on drafts of interview and survey instruments • Written reflections on unresolved methodological issues • Written outline of data collection procedures
II. Data collection and analyses	September, 1993–June, 1994	• Four 2½-hour-long team conference calls • Follow-up memoranda • Local team analysis session (4½ hours), Jan, 1994, DW/JY/DA • Two face-to-face team meetings for analyzing data at National Reading Conference (Dec., 1993) and International Reading Association (May, 1994) • Electronic mail • Individual phone calls • Faxes • Surface mail packets	• Respond to teacher and researcher survey • Establish individual case timelines • Select focal students using teachers' input • Revise earlier drafts of interview and survey instruments • Define discussion "events" • Make weekly observations of class discussions (different sites to follow their own timelines) • Videotape three class discussions at each site (beginning, middle, and end of each case) • Conduct follow-up focal group interviews • Exchange trifolds and theoretical memos across sites for triangulation of data • Write narrative vignettes • Exchange videotapes, transcriptions of audiotaped focal group interviews, and field notes across sites • Construct key linkages • Continue exchange of professional articles	• Individual case timelines • Completed interview and survey instruments • Field notes, videotapes, audiotape transcriptions • Theoretical memos • Trifolds • Narrative vignettes • Key linkage charts • Preliminary synthesis presented at Reading Research '94 in Toronto
III. Synthesis of findings	July–August, 1994	• Electronic mail • Individual phone calls • Local team analysis session (8 days), Aug., 1994, DA/JY/DW	• Reread all five cases and highlight key linkages (DA and JY) • Identify assertions • Write first draft and incorporate information from narrative vignettes • Compile data distribution tables	• First draft of findings • Data distribution tables
IV. Drafting of final report	September–October, 1994	• Surface mail packets • Electronic mail • Individual phone calls • Team conference call	• All team members reread their own cases and compile data distribution tables for three assertions • React to four drafts of final report • Submit final report for publication	• Drafts #1, #2, #3, #4 • Data distribution tables • Final report

Figure 2. Phases of Data Collection and Analysis

discussion event was said to begin with the teacher giving directions on how students were to interact with each other, and it ended either with the students reporting back to the whole class (following peer-led small group discussion) or with the teacher calling a halt to student-to-student interaction (following teacher-led whole group discussion).

We developed a procedure for recording, triangulating, analyzing, and sharing all team members' observations related to the questions that guided the study. This procedure, which was on-going during phase two of this study and occurred simultaneously with new data collection (see Figure 2), involved reading and rereading all field notes and transcriptions of videotaped discussions and focal group interviews. Prior to participating in face-to-face team meetings and telephone conference calls during phase two, we identified general and subsidiary key linkages of the data within and across cases. This inductive analytic approach to discovering and testing patterns of data led to the generation of several assertions. According to Erickson (1986),

> An appropriate metaphor for this kind of pattern discovery and testing is to think of the entire data set . . . as a large cardboard box, filled with pieces of paper on which appear items of data. The key linkage is an analytic construct that ties strings to these various items of data. Up and down a hierarchy of general and subsidiary linkages, some of the strings attach to other strings. The task of pattern analysis is to discover and test those linkages that make the largest possible number of connections to items of data in the corpus. When one pulls the top string, one wants as many subsidiary strings as possible to be attached to data. The strongest assertions are those that have the most strings attached to them, across the widest possible range of sources and kinds of data. (p. 148)

To check the trustworthiness of the assertions we generated, we sought disconfirming as well as confirming evidence. If the instances of discrepant cases caused us to doubt an emerging assertion, or if key linkages came primarily from one data source or one site, then we reworded the assertion to qualify the language so that it applied to all settings within the study. In several instances, and especially early in the analysis, we ended up abandoning some assertions in favor of others that had better linkages across a variety of data sources.

We wrote narrative vignettes in an effort to explain and support the assertions that we generated. Composing these vignettes was a useful part of the analysis process because it pushed each of us to come to terms in a more public way with our beliefs about the value of particular assertions. The vignettes (see example in Appendix) contained excerpts that we lifted verbatim from primary and secondary data sources and then embedded within our own interpretive commentary. Portions of these narrative vignettes were used in writing up the findings that follow.

Results

Several understandings are important for the proper interpretation of the three assertions that follow. First, it is important to recognize that in generating each assertion we were

attempting to build abstractions across the five sites in our multicase study. This is in keeping with Yin (1984), who noted that one attempts "to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details" (p. 108). Second, it was this variation in details that prompted us to write each assertion in a way that focused primarily on Dera's class. Because the first three authors audiotaped and subsequently transcribed nearly all of the discussions in her class, they amassed a rich set of data that served well as a base for confirmation and qualification of the data from the other four sites. Third, because we saw numerous instances in support of each of the assertions at each of the different sites, we compiled distribution tables to show the frequency of the supporting data across time and across a variety of primary and secondary sources.

We were able to generate three assertions to characterize what students know about text-based classroom discussion. The first assertion was that students were aware of the conditions that are conducive to discussion. Students' words supported this assertion, generally, and implied that they knew about working in small groups, about knowing and liking group members, about contributing to group talk, and about staying focused on a topic. The second assertion was that students believe the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion. Students' views about this assertion were supported with talk about specific tasks and topics. The third assertion was that students saw discussion as helpful in understanding what they read. This assertion was supported with student talk about the importance of listening to each other, voicing opinions/arguing, and attending to vocabulary.

Assertion #1: Students are aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to discussion.

Secondary school students in the United States typically participate in few classroom discussions, and the students in this study were no exception. To illustrate, early in October we asked the students in Dera's class what they thought of this research project. Brad said, "I like it because talking is one of the things that we are pretty deprived of at school. It is like, if we have a hat day, everybody will like the hat day; and if we have a whole class devoted to talking, then, I mean, people are going to like it. Which we did." John added, "We do [talk], but you aren't allowed to . . ." with Desuna finishing for him, "without getting into trouble" (FGI/JY/10/12/93). These words, and others like them, have woven themselves into the fabric of our investigation; a thread too fragile, certainly, to define a pattern or bind a border, but still a part of the whole, a subtle contribution to an intricate pattern. For if students are indeed "talk-deprived" in their classes, if they view talking in school as an often surreptitious activity, what perceptions of discussion—if any—have they developed?

Our first assertion, *students are aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to discussion*, is an important, even necessary, foundation of this study because realizing that our students had clear ideas and beliefs about discussions is as important as knowing the

Table 1. Data Distribution for Assertion #1: Students are aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to discussion.

Distribution of Episodes Across General and Subsidiary Linkages	
Linkages (General and Subsidiary)	Episodes (By Source, Researcher, and Date)
Working in small group	(FGI/DA/2/1/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/11/4/93) (FGI/KH/12/9/93) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FGI/KH/4/28/94) (FN/KH/5/26/94) (FN/DM/3/3/94) (FGI/DM/5/10/94) (SA/ET/3/15/94) (FN/SP/11/12/93) (FN/SP/12/20/93) (VT/SP/1/12/94) (FGI/SP/4/18/94) (FGI/SP/1/13/94) (AT/DW/1/5/94) (FGI/JY/10/12/93) (NFGI/JY/10/12/93) (FGI/JY/12/14/93) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)
Knowing and liking group members	(FGI/DA/1/29/94) (FGI/DA/2/1/94) (NFGI/DA/3/3/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/11/4/93) (FGI/KH/12/6/93) (FGI/KH/12/9/93) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FGI/KH/4/28/94) (FGI/DM/3/3/94) (FGI/SP/4/18/94) (FGI/SP/10/29/93) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (SA/DW/9/17/93) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)
Contributing to group talk	(FGI/DA/1/20/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (VT/KH/10/26/93) (FGI/KH/11/4/93) (VT/KH/12/9/94) (FGI/KH/12/9/93) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FGI/KH/4/28/94) (AT/DM/2/24/94) (FGI/DM/3/3/94) (FGI/DM/5/10/95) (FGI/SP/10/29/93) (FGI/SP/1/13/94) (FGI/SP/4/18/94) (SA/DW/10/13/93) (SA/DW/10/12/93) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (NFGI/JY/10/13/93) (FGI/JY/12/14/93) (FGI/JY/1/20/94) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)
Staying focused on the topic	(FGI/DA/3/1/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FGI/DM/3/3/94) (FGI/SP/10/29/93) (FN/ET/11/2/93) (SW/DW/1/11/94) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (FGI/JY/10/12/93) (FGI/JY/12/14/93) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)

Note: A key to the abbreviations of data sources: FN (field notes); FGI (focal group interview); AT (audiotape); SA (student artifact); TS (teacher survey); VT (videotape)

content of those ideas and beliefs. As noted earlier, the frequency of the data supporting this assertion is presented in the tables. In the remainder of this section, we portray the four specific conditions that students believed were conducive to good discussion: working in small groups, knowing and liking group members, contributing to group talk, and staying focused on the topic.

Working in small groups. Early in the year, before peer-led discussion in small groups had become the norm in Dera's class, students indicated an overall preference for small-group discussions over whole-class discussions. As John put it, "I kind of like those [small groups] because you don't have to fight over, you don't have to wait and wait and wait before you have a chance to talk. You only have like five peo-

ple in the group and everybody is close enough to hear you, so you just kind of say your thing when you feel like it." Alice added, "The small group is kind of nicer because it is more personal and people kind of listen to you more and get interested in it" (FGI/JY/10/12/93). In another interview, Jonathan referred to a previous whole class discussion when he said, "I only had one thing I would like to say, and I tried to say it, but someone cut in front of me." Christy offered, "It seems like it takes forever for [the teacher] to call on me, and by that time we have gone on to another subject, by the time I get to say anything." Small groups were especially attractive to Melanie, who was described by her classmates as quiet-natured: "It gets me nervous to talk in front of a whole lot of people about, like, opinions and stuff. But then, small group, it's like me and my friends, so it is easier" (FGI/JY/10/12/93).

Across three of the other four sites, students voiced similar perceptions about group size. With few exceptions, they preferred small-group discussions, which were peer-led, to teacher-directed whole-class discussions. For example, after one group of students in Paula's senior English class watched a video of themselves discussing Sylvia Plath's poem, *Daddy*, Alex commented that they were asking questions and talking a lot among themselves. Other members of his group agreed and elaborated on Alex's statement. Brian said, "I think the smaller group was better because there are less people to hassle you. You can go ahead and say something that you're not real sure about. Try out ideas." June agreed, adding that she thought the small group made it possible for students to explore what they thought about the poem in more depth (FGI/DM/3/3/94).

In Patricia's sophomore global studies class, teacher-directed whole-class discussions were more prevalent than peer-led small-group discussions, at least for the first semester. Nonetheless, except for Jennifer and Kate, who preferred to "talk to the teacher because she knows the answer" (FN/KH/5/26/94), the other focal students expressed a preference for peer-led groups. For example, Mike liked talking to a small group of his peers because "You can say the wrong answer . . . without the whole class laughing" (FGI/KH/4/28/94), while Tammy liked small groups because they helped her pay attention:

Tammy: I think we should work in small groups everyday. It helps me.

Kiesha: When we're in a big class [interrupted]

Tammy: Everyone gets off task. Justin sits there and makes noises . . . . I don't pay attention at all. He got his book out and made it fly, and we were all laughing. (FGI/KH/3/10/94)

In Esther's eighth-grade language arts class, small-group work was the norm. Whole-class discussion was infrequent and reserved mostly for days when students shared a project they had worked on in their small groups. Students were assigned to more or less permanent groups of four or five individuals, with a team captain acting as the spokesperson for the group. When asked to describe how she and her peers felt about small group discussion, Janice, a popular and outspoken team captain,

was positive in her response. She liked getting together and talking about a topic with her team (SA/ET/3/15/94).

The students at one site countered the general favor for discussions in small groups. The students in Alan's eleventh-grade U.S. History class were encouraged to discuss their assignments in small groups, but they rarely did, opting instead to work alone (FN/SP/11/-12/93; FN/SP/12/20/93) or in pairs (VT/SP/-1/12/94). When asked why he thought his peers did not choose to engage in small-group discussions, Rico attributed it to ethnic and racial biases, saying, "See, some people, you know it's like they don't want to talk to someone who's different. And you know, a lot of people felt that way about me. But I'm half Puerto Rican, you know, so . . . the majority of this school is Puerto Rican, so they talk to me . . . because I have the same ethnic race as them" (FGI/SP/1/13/94).

In general, most—but not all—students reported preferring discussion in small groups rather than in a large group. Small-group discussions seemed to promote students' class involvement by increasing the number of times they could talk and by decreasing the risks they took when expressing personal or tentative thoughts.

Knowing and liking group members. Early in the year, Dera conducted a confidential survey to learn student preferences for the makeup of small-group discussions. The students had strong feelings at that time about peers with whom they felt they could or could not talk successfully, and they expressed these preferences clearly. Friendship played a part, but the students also gave consideration to their perceptions of the ways in which other students might approach a discussion. At the time of the survey, most students listed at least one or two of their peers under the heading "people I can't discuss with". At the beginning of the year, the makeup of a group seemed to be a highly influential condition for good discussion.

In the beginning, Dera tried various ways of grouping the students for discussion (sometimes based on the confidential survey, but not always). Before long, she began to turn the choice of forming discussion groups over to the students themselves. They suggested a variety of groupings, such as placing students who talked a lot in one group and those who were better listeners in another group. Giving students some choices in how they formed their groups seemed a logical step in exploring peer-led discussion. However, for some students, these choices presented problems; for instance, Desuna worried that if her peers put the groups together, friends would choose friends and some people would be left out (SA/DW/9/17/-93). In the early stages of discussion with student-selected groups, there were some uncomfortable moments that required Dera's intervention, but over the course of the year, the students' attitudes toward forming discussion groups began to change. In March, Sandra reported, "I think that we–I guess as we started, we have become more comfortable with talking with almost everyone in the class, and we are just, like, we will go to whoever. It doesn't really matter anymore. It is not like, well, I don't like you, I don't want to go with you, I don't want to be in a group with you, I want to be in a group with my best friend or anything like that. It just–we are all just com-

fortable talking with each other now" (FGI/-DA/3/3/94).

Unwilling to discount totally the importance of friendship, Mark reviewed the following history: "Some people are saying, well, no, it doesn't have anything to do with friendship, but it does. Because, um, my group [today] was me, Brad, Sandra, Omar, and Duncan. And, um, we are all friends. And then me and Sandra and Brad have been together during the group ever since she [Dera] has been telling us, well, 'just find a group'. That was the first time that we got in a group, and then Melanie and April were in there, too, and then they went to another one and me and Brad and Sandra still stayed together. And, um, then, so I think it does have a lot to do with friendship" (FGI/DA/3/3/94).

The idea of forming "talk-alike" discussion groups appealed to the students in PF's classroom as well. They saw an advantage to putting outspoken people together after viewing a videotape from Dera's classroom. For example, Heather felt it would be less intimidating for the more quiet students if the outspoken ones were in a group by themselves. Alex agreed, saying, "Like, like me–me and Heather–we'll talk no matter if someone's talking or not" (FGI/DM/5/10/94). Friendship was a factor identified as being important to the makeup of a group in Paula's class as well. In fact, after viewing a videotape of Esther's class, Alex wondered if the noticeably small amount of student-to-student talk could be attributed to "they weren't good friends–like us" (FGI/DM/5/10/94).

The focal students in Patricia's class said that they usually preferred to be in groups with their friends, or with others whom they knew well. Overall, they transmitted a sense of knowing which students worked productively, and although they were quick to say they wanted to work with friends, in the end, getting the job done was more important. A few, like Jennifer, thought the teacher should let the students pick their own group members: "Like our teacher, she just puts us in these groups . . . . I think if she would let us pick our own groups, we would pick the people that we know can work together . . . . I mean like then [we'd know] we had to get the project done, and we could all say since we were friends, come on we have to do this" (FGI/KH/11/4/93). Kiesha agreed that being with people you know well can motivate you to participate (FGI/KH/3/10/-94), as did Mike, Tammy, and Jennifer on several other occasions (FGI/KH/11/4/93; FGI/KH/12/9/93).

Knowing a lot about other group members, including their expectations, was seen by students in Esther's room as being a condition that is conducive to good discussion. Martha said she expected people in her group to do their work and make discussion "a little fun" (FGI/DA/2/1/94). Martha also noted, after viewing videotapes of discussions in Alan's and Dera's rooms, that it would take much maneuvering and getting to know Alan's and Dera's students before she would feel comfortable participating in any of their discussion groups: "First I would have to have some nerve. Then I would have to get to know the people, you know, all kinds of things they do in that group. And then I know if I be in that group–then I would just act like they act" (FGI/-DA/3/15/94).

Like Denise, Tyrone, who was a focal student in Alan's class, believed it was important for newcomers in a group to get to know the group before venturing to say anything. In giving advice about how a new student from the Middle East might "fit in" one of the existing groups, Tyrone described what he himself would do in such a situation: "I would just stay quiet for a while to see what's going on" (FGI-/SP/4/18/94). Tyrone believed that "if [students] pick their own group," they get along better. However, both Tyrone and Nick, another focal student in Alan's room, thought it was the teacher's responsibility to help quiet or shy students feel more comfortable. Nick's belief in the advantage of grouping students with similar personality traits was indicated by his suggestion to, "Put them together, you know. Shy people talk to each other, to other shy people" (FGI/SP/10/29/93).

Several aspects of knowing and liking are evident in our students' remarks about this condition of good discussions. Knowing and liking someone before working together in a group might be important, but some students also realized that friendships developed as a result of group work. Along with the notion of friendship, students indicated that compatibility could come when others shared personality traits, worked together productively, and were fun. Students who somehow fit in with each other created good discussions.

Contributing to group talk. Across all five sites, students believed that doing one's fair share of the talking was everyone's responsibility. In fact, most students in Dera's class described the responsibilities of group membership in terms of an obligation to participate in the talk: "Say what you have to say," suggested Duncan, and Jason added, "contribute something when you feel like it" (SA/DW/10/13/93). Some students noted differences in the quality of talk. In describing Jason, Jonathan said, "He doesn't say stupid stuff, yeah, what he says is important . . . lots of people who talk all the time, like, they come out with stuff that has nothing to do with anything, but when Jason talks he says something that has meaning" (FGI/JY/10/13/93). And John described his own role in this way: "Well, like, if I don't have much to say, there is really no point in participating, because you just waste other people's time by saying something that should be ignored . . . . I just participate when I think I have a good point" (FGI/JY/1/20/94). Brad, however, had no such reservations. In a small-group discussion when Mark commented that Melanie chose to talk less for fear of sounding stupid, Brad responded, "That is how I *was*, like, in first grade, but then I grew out of it. I just say the stupid stuff . . . nobody cares. And it adds to discussion" (AT/1/11/94).

To Alex, in Paula's room, contributing to group talk meant exhibiting "a certain degree of seriousness," and to his classmates, Heather and June, it meant "trying to involve everybody" and "asking questions of other people . . . not just taking it all upon yourself" (FGI/-DM/5/10/94). When asked what students new to their class would be expected to do to demonstrate that they were contributing to group talk, the focal students in Paula's class responded: "Say what you feel" (Alex), "Don't be afraid to share your feelings" (Ruby), and "Don't put people down" (Heather) (FGI/-DM/3/3/94).

The focal students in Patricia's room believed that peer-led discussions worked when all individuals in the group felt obligated to do their part rather than rely on one or two people to carry the load. Interestingly, "doing one's part" seemed to relate directly to whether or not students talked. Simply doing the assigned work individually and writing down individual answers did not count. For example, after viewing a taped discussion on the day her group began working on a Middle East report (VT/KH/10/26/93), Jennifer announced, "I think my group doesn't work together very well because they don't say anything, and I feel like I do all the work" (FGI/KH/11/4/93). And, on another day as students viewed a videotaped discussion involving their group (VT/KH/12/9/93), Jennifer complained that Elaine didn't say anything: "See, look. She writes stuff down, but she doesn't say anything" (FGI/KH/12/9/93). When asked what a newcomer would have to do to join one of their small groups, Joseph replied, "Do your part." Other students chimed in and agreed with Joseph, while Justin added, "Put some effort in, instead of just sitting there saying, 'What is your answer?' or 'What did you get?'" (FGI/KH/11/4/93).

Students in Esther's class were equally clear about the need for their team mates to contribute to group talk about an assignment. Team captains had little patience for members of their group who didn't read their assignments and weren't prepared for discussion (FGI/JY/12/14/93). For example, after viewing a videotape of her group, Janice said in an irritated voice, "There are some people in the group that don't read the story, and then when we are trying to do a resource page, they want to know what happened. They don't want to read, but they always want the answers" (FGI/DA/3/15/94).

Different motivations for contributing to group talk existed for students in Alan's room. Two of the focal students felt it was their responsibility to initiate the group's discussion. Nick said, "I only participate to get it going. You just sit there"—at which point Tyrone interrupted him to say, "You just sit there, it gets boring" (FGI/SP/10/29/93). But Rico did not agree that it was the students' responsibility to initiate discussion, believing instead that it would take some intervention on the teacher's part because some students adopted a pose of indifference or hostility: "A lot of these students, you know, they got that 'gangsta' type thing to them, so it's like they come in there and it's like 'What's up?' you know, and they're hard guys. But you know, a lot of them you can see right through it, you know" (FGI/SP/1/13/94).

In brief, the students we talked with indicated several responsibilities that group members should fulfill to contribute to group talk. The students disdained those who took from the group without offering anything in return. They noted group members' responsibilities toward each other such as initiating talk, getting others involved through questioning, and keeping order. Demonstrating responsibility for their own behavior included actions such as offering pertinent points about a topic, sharing personal beliefs, and working to fulfill the academic task. One responsibility, staying focused on the topic, received enough attention to warrant a separate category in this study.

Staying focused on the topic. From the first focal group interview, students in Dera's class were aware that they got off the topic of discussion easily and thought that this was detrimental to a good discussion. John believed that straying from the topic hindered his ability to understand it. Alice added, "I forgot what the topic was after the discussion was over, because, I mean, we really were not at all on the topic. We spent hardly five minutes on it" (FGI/JY/10/12/93). In noting a possible reason for straying from a topic, Brad said, "There are a lot of things in our minds that we aren't thinking of, and words can trigger those, and . . . when you have the whole classroom talking and someone says something it can trigger those off and it keeps on going" (FGI/JY/10/12/93). This statement was reflected later in the year with John's description of his own discussion style: "If the subject goes off, I help it go further . . . because it is something that I am interested in, usually" (FGI/JY/3/1/94).

In Paula's and Alan's classes, students were equally adamant about their expectations for groups to stay focused on the topic of discussion, especially peer-led discussion groups. For example, Alex in Paula's class remarked after viewing a videotape of his group's discussion of Sylvia Plath's poem, *Daddy*: "Sticking on the subject . . . would have made the small groups work even more if people would have stayed on the topic. Sometimes the topic floats. I even do that. I'll say, 'What about the Suns?' (laughter), and then we get off the subject" (FGI/DM/3/3/94). Brian agreed with Alex that peer-led discussions should "keep focused," while Heather thought that "breaking [the poem] down to the themes" might have helped the group stay focused (FGI/DM/3/3/94). In Alan's class, Nick believed that small-group discussions encouraged off-task behavior unless the teacher was there to keep an eye on the students who strayed from the topic. In Nick's words: "When they get in groups like that, they just talk about their own things . . . . If you keep them together, you can watch them, they do their work" (FGI/SP/10/29/93).

Students at two of the other research sites reported that when a group got off topic, one or more students would remind everyone of the need to stay focused. For example, the focal students in Patricia's class counted on Peggy or Kate to assume that role: "I mean she's [Peggy] fun and everything, but when we get off the subject and she knows we have to be done, that's when she'll say something," Kiesha said (FGI/KH/3/10/94). Or, as Mike noted, "We were talking about something today, and then Kate said, 'Come on, let's get this done.' She started getting annoyed, too" (FGI/KH/2/3/-94). In Esther's room, the team captains said it was their responsibility to keep their groups focused on the topic. Janice reported that the reason the teacher had picked her to be a captain was because "I know how to keep order" (FGI/JY/12/14/94).

As these comments suggest, students expressed the belief that staying focused is a characteristic of good discussions. They noted that individuals and groups often pursued thoughts with obscure relationships to the original topic. They distinguished among discussions that focused on a specific aspect of a topic, that explored topics in different ways, and that pursued unrelated topics.

Table 2. Data Distribution for Assertion #2: Students say the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion.

Distribution of Episodes Across General and Subsidiary Linkages	
Linkages (General and Subsidiary)	Episodes (By Source, Researcher, and Date)
Tasks	(FGI/DA/2/1/94) (NFGI/DA/3/3/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (WS/DA/4/5/94) (VT/KH/10/26/93) (FGI/KH/11/4/93) (VT/KH/12/6/93) (FGI/KH/12/9/93) (FN/KH/3/10/94) (FGI/DM/3/3/94) (FN/DM/3/10/94) (FN/DM/3/24/94) (FN/SP/11/12/93) (FN/SP/12/1/93) (FGI/SP/1/13/94) (VT/SP/1/12/94) (FN/SP/2/1/94) (FN/SP/3/9/94) (SA/DW/10/26/93) (TS/DW/11/1/93) (AT/DW/10/25/93) (AT/DW/11/16/93) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (AT/DW/2/15/94) (FN/DW/2/16/94) (FGI/JY/10/12/93) (FGI/JY/12/9/93) (FGI/JY/12/14/93) (FN/JY/12/14/93) (FGI/JY/2/1/94) (FN/JY/2/16/94)
Topics	(FGI/DA/1/20/94) (FGI/DA/2/1/94) (FN/DA/2/22/94) (FGI/DA/3/3/94) (NFGI/DA/3/3/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/11/4/93) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FN/DM/11/5/93) (FGI/DM/2/10/94) (FGI/DM/3/3/94) (FN/DM/3/24/94) (FGI/DM/5/10/94) (FGI/SP/10/29/93) (FN/SP/12/20/93) (FN/SP/3/9/94) (FN/SP/6/10/94) (SA/DW/10/12/93) (AT/DW/10/18/93) (AT/DW/1/5/94) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (NFGI/JY/10/13/93) (FN/JY/10/25/93) (FGI/JY/12/14/93) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)

Note: A key to the abbreviations of data sources: FN (field notes); FGI (focal group interview); AT (audiotape); SA (student artifact); TS (teacher survey); VT (videotape)

Assertion #2: Students say the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion

This assertion reflects students' perceptions that their participation in text-based discussions varied with the task and topic their teachers assigned. Our students' comments about these task and topic influences revealed rather sophisticated understandings. Perhaps this level of sophistication should be expected after considering the numerous experiences secondary-school students have with academic work. In this section, we specify the commonalities across sites of students' statements about discussion tasks and topics.

Tasks. The discussion tasks Dera assigned students grew from her own goals for discussion. In her words, "I want something to emerge from discussion that wasn't there in individual readings: a new way of seeing; an uncomfortable sense that the world may not be quite as one had always assumed; a flash of insight into personal attitudes and beliefs; or just a sense of having worked well together.

Whatever form it takes, something more than the simple sum of each reader's separate experience" (TS/DW/11/1/93). The tasks Dera presented for discussion encouraged students to *interpret* (e.g., "Everyone says teachers only ask questions they already know the answers to. Well, I don't understand the last paragraph of this story . . . help me out" (SA/10/26/93); *compare* (e.g., "These poems have some relationship, and I want to know how they relate and how you would present them to the class" AT/2/22/94); and *introspect* (e.g., "As you read a poem, are there things outside the poem that someone could tell you that might enrich your experience and enjoyment of it?" AT/2/15/94).

Although Dera's questions influenced the beginning of a discussion, students felt little obligation to follow them when the questions they raised in their small groups proved more interesting. When Dera asked, "Did you discuss my questions? The questions that I asked you at the beginning," Laura, with a somewhat embarrassed laugh, answered for her group: "No. We didn't get to it" (AT/2/15/94). In fact, Laura's group had read and discussed the assignment, but not with Dera's questions in mind. On another occasion when DW asked the students to tell her how they went about doing what she asked them to do in their discussion groups, Jason said, "We usually read first; then we talk about whatever you hinted at." Jonathan elaborated: "We pretty much do this every time. I usually like to come up with some strategy for doing the assignment. Yesterday, I tried to bring them [other students in his group] back to your instructions, but I didn't get any response." Melanie added, "We just sort of forgot about it and worked," to which Laura responded, "Maybe we didn't quite hear it–it was important for us as a lead-in, but we didn't have time to get to your discussion" (FN/DW/2/16/94; FN/JY/2/16/94).

Like Dera, Paula also assigned tasks that were in line with her goals for discussion. She developed specific tasks involving comprehension, analysis, and evaluation to encourage students to synthesize material by relating it to other literature they had read or to current events (TS/DM/4/5/94). When Paula's assigned tasks met her students' expectations, animated small group discussions occurred. For example, when she prepared students to read *Crime and Punishment* by dividing them into two groups, one to discuss crime and its consequences, and the other to talk about the effects of punishment, a lively discussion ensued. Both groups brought current events into their discussions, including the notorious Lorena Bobbitt, Dr. Kervorkian, and Charles Manson (FN/DM/3/10/94). Tasks that met with less enthusiasm sometimes prompted a critical note from students, as in the case of Heather who thought a boring task had limited her participation in discussion. Reflecting on this task in a small group that included Paula, Heather stated: "It could have been done like in a more . . . imaginative way to analyze the poem instead of just breaking it down to the themes and what was actually in the poet's poem. Just make it more imaginative." (FGI/-DM/3/3/94)

Patricia's discussion tasks often reflected the influence of the state-mandated curriculum. Many times the tasks she assigned students involved reviewing details from previous

reading assignments based on that curriculum. Although students were expected to discuss their answers in small groups, they found ways to expedite the activity. For example, they would divide a set of questions among their peers and make each student responsible for answering a smaller number of questions. This practice resulted, not surprisingly, in students working independently with minimal discussion and calling out their answers to other members in their group (VT/KH/10/26/93; FGI/KH/-11/4/93). But when Patricia's tasks required students to link their knowledge of social studies concepts (e.g., the relation between geography and power) to specific locations (e.g., ancient Greece) to make predictions or to confirm hypotheses, lively discussions were the norm. Patricia's students were well aware of how these differences in tasks affected their participation level. For example, after viewing segments of a videotaped discussion in which they were actively engaged in writing a group story based on a Russian history unit (VT/KH/-12/6/93), several of the focal students commented that it was better than most previous discussion tasks in eliciting their participation (FGI/KH/12/9/93).

Students in Alan's class also felt the influence of a state-mandated curriculum. However, unlike the students in Patricia's class who enjoyed the occasional open-ended discussions that sparked heated debates, students in Alan's U.S. History class did not get much practice participating in peer-led small-group discussions. When the opportunity for such discussions did arise, students in Alan's class made it clear that in order for them to participate successfully, the task had to be clearly defined. When this expectation was not met, they communicated their sense of frustration and confusion. For example, in one videotaped discussion (VT/SP/1/12/94), students voiced their uncertainty over Alan's instructions to discuss Martin Luther King's six principles of nonviolence with their peers. After viewing segments of that tape during a focal group interview, Rico (laughing) said, "What the hell was [he] talking about? That is exactly what I was thinking . . . . I figured it out but . . . it was just real confusing the way he was doing it . . . . If he, like, put more detail in what he was explaining about, what he wanted us to actually do, I think it would have been a lot better" (FGI/SP/1/13/94).

Esther's discussion tasks consisted primarily of the questions and projects in the student resource book that accompanied the class's literature anthology. In many ways, these tasks were similar to the ones that Patricia assigned in her class, and not surprisingly, they elicited some of the same types of responses from students. For example, although Esther's students understood that they were expected to discuss an assigned resource page among themselves before completing and turning it in to the teacher, they rarely complied. When asked why, they explained that it was only necessary to talk to one another when someone didn't know the answer (FGI/DA/3/15/94). Thus, in instances where the task was not demanding (and therefore did not require discussing), they worked alone even though they agreed they would prefer to work together on tasks (FGI/JY/12/9/93).

In general, students perceived discussion-worthy tasks to be interesting and demanding

yet clearly defined and capable of drawing on their abilities to reason and to evaluate ideas. Indeed, some students substituted their own tasks for the teacher's assigned ones if these conditions were not met. Our students also indicated an expertise at adjusting their work habits to the demands of discussion tasks. Their degrees of collaboration and their individual responses relied substantially on the assignment they were completing.

Topics. Some students in Dera's class associated the topic of a particular reading selection with how much they talked about it. April, for example, said, "I discuss if I enjoy the story. Like, if I like the story, I like to talk about it. But if I don't like the story, I just want to sit there and be mean" (AT/1/11/94). And, when Alice was asked to comment on why she thought Desuna seldom participated in discussions, Alice said, "If she doesn't like something, she decides that she just won't do it." Desuna herself seemed to apply the standard of "liking the story" to her own assessments of other students' participation level. For example, when asked why she thought Andy had not participated in a discussion, Desuna said, "He didn't like the story, I don't think." And Jason? "He participated the most, so I think he enjoyed the story," replied Desuna (FGI/DE/1/20/94).

Nearly all the students in Dera's class expressed definite preferences for certain subject matter texts. For example, they preferred to discuss literary texts as opposed to social studies texts. After watching a videotaped segment of a discussion in Patricia's global studies class, Mark said, "[The] history of Russia sounds boring, but discussing a poem . . . sounds more creative and interesting." Melanie agreed saying, "Their group may not be boring, but . . . I had rather be in our group because I like discussing poetry better (FGI/DA/3/3/94).

Patricia's class was also aware of the different expectations students and teachers held for discussions of literary versus social studies texts. After viewing a videotape of Dera's students discussing a short story from the Junior Great Books program, Patricia's global studies students attributed the differences they observed in the two classes' discussions to the topics or subject matter of their assigned readings. Tammy said (and Kiesha agreed): "Everything's so hard that we do . . . . They [Dera's students] can say anything they want and there is really no wrong or right answer" (FGI/KH/3/10/94).

Like Patricia's students, those in Esther's room believed that their level of participation in a discussion depended heavily on the topic of the selections they were assigned to read. Martha summed up the topic's influence this way: "Now my group, you give us a good topic, we can make a discussion. I guess the discussion depends on the topic; if the topic is boring, you ain't going to hear nothing" (FGI/JY/2/1/94). Or, as Janice put it, after viewing a videotape of her group's rather listless response to a science fiction story, "It is the kind of story somebody with no friends would read." When asked to explain what she meant, Janice answered, "If you like that kind of story, evidently you ain't got no friends. It just made no sense. It is boring" (FGI/JY/12/14/93).

Paula's students were also convinced that the topic of a selection influenced their interest in discussing it. After viewing a videotape of her group's discussion of a James Thurber short story, June attributed the students' lack of participation to the fact that "We didn't have a good enough topic to discuss," and Heather agreed (FGI/DM/2/10/94). Like the students in Dera's and Patricia's classes, Heather expressed definite views on the important role subject matter plays in the nature of discussions. On one occasion, she explained, "To me the subject makes a big deal because you can become more outspoken for one certain subject" (FGI/DM/3/3/94), and still later, Heather said, "In English you debate a lot more about the question because we all see it from different points of view" (FGI/DM/5/10/94). Brian disagreed about the need to debate a question. He maintained that he spoke up more in discussions during calculus class where there was only one right answer to a question and he knew how to get it: "I show them [members of his group in calculus] how to do it, and then it makes me feel good, so then, I'll show more" (FGI/DM/5/10/94).

As for how they viewed the relation between choice of topic and level of participation in discussion, Alan's students assessed the situation this way: If the topic is not interesting, Tyrone and Nick noted, then it is the teacher's responsibility to "make it sound exciting." In Tyrone's words, "Stress it more, you know. I mean . . . you gotta project it to the students more. Make them want to understand it" (FGI/SP/10/29/93).

To summarize, students expressed preferences for topics that they experienced as likeable, interesting, and debatable. Most students valued topics that were naturally interesting; some held the teacher responsible for arousing interest in dull topics. Students typically favored subject matter topics found in literary texts over those found in social studies texts.

Assertion #3: Students see discussion as helpful in understanding what they read.

Like our first assertion, this one has two dimensions. Realizing that students see discussions as helpful is one dimension, and understanding how students think discussions render this help is another. Knowing that students value the impact of discussions justifies knowing how discussions affect their understandings of what they read. In this section, we specify the following three ways that students across all five sites said discussions helped them understand what they read: listening to each other, voicing their opinions/arguing, and attending to vocabulary.

Listening to each other. The students in Dera's class viewed listening as an important part of discussion, even while recognizing that their own listening skills were not always adequate. Reflecting on ways she could improve her participation in discussion, Alice said, "I think maybe I have to listen to other people more. Because I don't think I listen, um, I think I talk more than I listen. And listening, listening is a good skill to have" (FGI/JY/1/20/94). On another occasion, Laura and Sandra shared reasons for thinking that they had improved their understanding of an assigned reading by listening to others in their group. In Laura's words, "We thought we

Table 3. Data Distribution for Assertion #3: Students see discussion as helpful in understanding what they read.

Distribution of Episodes Across General and Subsidiary Linkages	
Linkages (General and Subsidiary)	Episodes (By Source, Researcher, and Date)
Listening	(FGI/DA/3/1/94) (FGI/DA/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (FN/KH/5/26/94) (FGI/DM/2/10/94) (FN/DM/5/10/94) (FGI/SP/4/18/94) (SA/ET/3/15/94) (SA/DW/10/12/93) (AT/DW/1/4/94) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (FN/DW/2/16/94) (FGI/JY/1/20/94) (FGI/JY/2/1/94) (FN/JY/2/16/94) (TS/PZ/9/20/93)
Voicing opinions/arguing	(FGI/DA/1/20/94) (FGI/DA/1/20/94) (FGI/DA/1/25/94) (FGI/DA/2/1/94) (FGI/DE/3/15/94) (FGI/KH/2/3/94) (FGI/KH/3/10/94) (AT/DM/4/18/94) (FN/DM/12/13/93) (FGI/DM/2/10/94) (FN/DM/3/24/94) (FGI/DM/5/10/94) (FGI/SP/1/13/94) (SA/ET/3/15/94) (SA/DW/10/12/94) (AT/DW/1/5/94) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (AT/DW/1/15/94) (NFGI/JY/10/13/93) (FGI/JY/1/20/94) (FGI/JY/2/1/94)
Attending to questions of vocabulary	(FGI/DA/1/25/94) (FGI/DA/3/3/94) (FGI/KH/12/9/93) (FGI/2/3/94) (FN/DM/12/13/93) (FN/DM/2/3/94) (FGI/SP/10/29/93) (VT/SP/1/12/94) (FGI/SP/1/14/94) (AT/DW/10/26/93) (VT/DW/1/11/94) (AT/DW/1/11/94) (FN/DW/2/16/94) (AT/DW/2/16/94) (FGI/JY/1/20/94)

Note: A key to the abbreviations of data sources: FN (field notes); FGI (focal group interview); AT (audiotape); SA (student artifact); TS (teacher survey); VT (videotape)

were a good discussion group because, I mean, we tried to listen to what everybody had to say, really, instead of just trying to talk over people." To which Sandra added, "And instead of just trying to get across what you are trying to say, I mean, now, that is important, but you should also give others a chance to get across what they want to say" (AT/1/11/94).

According to several students in Dera's class, learning to give others a chance to say what they want to say was a factor in April's growth as a discussant over the course of the year. John, Jonathan, and Laura thought April listened more and was more open-minded, while Brad was more blunt in his assessment of her progress: "You can get her to shut up easier . . . . It is the truth. She kept going blah, blah, blah, and she would keep on talking, and you would go, 'April, please keep quiet,' and she will stop now. Because she wants other people to–she is eager to *hear* now, not eager to talk" (FGI/DA/3/1/94).

Students in Paula's room were similarly appreciative of what they could learn by listen-

ing to others express their ideas. In describing how his group's discussion motivated him to think more deeply about what he had read, Alex said, "Well, sometimes people get ideas, that-'Yeah, I never thought of that!'" Or, as Heather put it: "If we had just read the story, people would have been interested to just let the story drop. To just think about how *they* interpreted it, and then that was it. But . . . as we discussed it, we saw a lot more depth in the story" (FGI/DM/2/10/94).

One of Patricia's stated goals for discussion was that it would expand students' understandings of a concept (TS/PZ/9/20/93), and it did appear to do that. Students typically listened and reacted to each other's ideas until they had reached some kind of group consensus about what they had read. Maryanne thought she learned better in peer-led discussions because she understood what other students were saying (FN/KH/5/26/94). Justin agreed: "Because you get ideas from other students and not from the teacher. You understand better from someone your own age that has the same background" (FGI/2/3/94). Esther's and Alan's students also felt they had a better understanding of what they read when they listened to their peers discuss a selection. When asked why she thought her teacher liked students to discuss what they had read, Janice said that Esther must realize students understand their peers better than they understand her (FGI/JY/-2/1/94). Tyrone believed that "The best thing to do [in Alan's class] is just like, listen . . . and then take it from there after you hear it out, and then ask a question." When Stephen asked, "So, if I'm hearing you right, you think that some of discussion has to do with listening?" Tyrone responded emphatically, "*Most* of discussion has to do with listening, 'cause you and me couldn't discuss anything we talking about if I wasn't listening" (FGI/SP/-4/18/94).

As can be seen, students respected the role of listening during discussions. They indicated that they gained different ideas about a passage especially by listening to their peers' comments.

Voicing opinions/arguing. In the peer-led discussions in Dera's room, rudimentary listening skills often gave way in the face of widely differing and strongly held opinions. Offering opinions on a topic was frequently mentioned by students as helping them understand what they read, but knowing when to withhold such opinions was not a simple matter (SA/10/14/93, FGI/DA/1/20/94). Nor was it a simple matter to distinguish between expressing one's opinions and arguing, as seen in Laura's and Alice's experiences of their own talk. According to Laura, "[Alice] tries to get her point across and just say 'Well, did you understand this, because I understood it this way . . . . And she kind of says *she's* right and if *we* didn't understand it that way then how could *we* not understand it that way or whatever." Alice, on the other hand, offered her own version of her discussion style (without, incidentally, having heard Laura's): "Well, I have noticed that sometimes when I am talking to someone I usually . . . keep on explaining to them until they understand what I am saying. And so maybe I like to argue. We certainly did do a lot of that in my group" (FGI/JY/1/20/94).

Argument was an acknowledged fact of life during discussions in Dera's classroom, and the students talked freely about this feature of their talk and how it helped them to understand what they read. It was a feature of talk students in Patricia's room could also identify with. For example, Justin noted, after viewing an argument between Laura and Alice on videotape, "I'm always arguing. I'm trying to get my point across." When asked why others in his group were reminded of Kate (a girl in Patricia's class) when they watched the argument involving Laura and Alice, Justin replied, "Because she [Kate] talks and talks. She tries to get her point across. That's good though" (FGI/KH/3/10/94). And for Rico, in Alan's class, arguing or stating one's opinion was just a way of standing out and defining one's self: "You got to say what you want. People are not mind readers, you know, and if you want to be noticed, you have to open up and say something, you know" (FGI/SP/1/13/94).

Students at the other two research sites generally saw themselves as being less opinionated and argumentative than Dera's students, however. After viewing a videotaped discussion involving students in Dera's room, Heather (a twelfth grader in Paula's class) stated: "They were really opinionated [laughter]. I was surprised . . . . I remember what I was like in seventh and eighth grade. I don't think I was that opinionated" (FGI/DM/5/-10/94). But Heather, Alex, and Brian all agreed that other people's opinions were valuable to their understanding of what they read, especially when those opinions helped them to "look at something from a different point of view" (FGI/DM/2/10/94).

While students in Esther's class attributed arguing among their own group members simply to the fact that they all had "their different opinions," they were reluctant to attribute the same reasoning to Dera's class. Comments from Esther's students, after viewing Laura and Alice's interaction, ranged from "They couldn't get along" to "They could have quit fussing and arguing and listen to each other and then express their opinions" to "More humor; you need that to have a good time" (FGI/DA/3/15/94).

As the students noted above, expressing oneself gave people something to think about. The focus of these comments was on what discussions did for listeners; only a few comments were about what discussions did for speakers. Additionally, many students in this study seemed to view the speaking component of discussions primarily as an opportunity to persuade others. Only a few comments were about discussions as opportunities to search for consensus or to explore alternative interpretations.

Attending to vocabulary. Some students in Dera's room were convinced that attending to the meaning of vocabulary was a priority. It was, as Alice said, "like they wanted to know what the words meant so they would get what the story was trying to tell them" (FGI/JY/-1/20/94). In referring to her own group's discussion of a story, Desuna said, "Some of it, it was like old language, and it had a lot of hard words . . . . They had, like, a whole list of hard words, like down one page, and you were going back and forth to the dictionary, trying to find out and if you didn't, then you wouldn't understand the story"

(FGI/DA/1/25/94). Yet, when Dera asked the students if they would prefer that she preteach the vocabulary that would likely present some trouble, they said "no". Laura explained, "When you tell me, I don't want to know. If I come across it on my own, I have a reason to find it." Jason and Mark agreed, while Jonathan noted, "If you tell us, it might focus more attention on the word than it really deserves." Laura nodded in agreement, adding, "Yeah, it's like you make the word in boldface" (AT/DW/2/16/94).

After viewing a videotape of a discussion in Patricia's class, Dera's students drew a distinction between their own use of the dictionary to look up vocabulary and that of the students in Patricia's class. Jason noted: "The groups in the video–they seem like really stiff. Because all of the groups seem to be following a pattern. They all start reading and they are doing all of this stuff, and we don't do that. We, like, look up a word if we want to, and then we start talking about things. They didn't seem *into* it." Sandra added: "It just seemed like they were looking at one person to look up the word and read what it meant. And then they would all write it down" (FGI/DA/3/3/94). However, at least some of Patricia's students did see group discussions as helpful to their understanding of the vocabulary in their social studies text. For example, Mike commented that the students in his group put the text in "easier terms" (FGI/KH/12/9/93), and Jennifer thought her group learned a great deal from each other when they discussed a long list of vocabulary on Russian history that they used in creating a group story (VT/KH/12/9/93).

In Paula's class, one pattern of talking about vocabulary that contributed to students' understanding of what they read consisted of students spontaneously inserting themselves into classroom talk by questioning Paula or a peer about unfamiliar terms. "What is a *concept*?" (FN/DM/11/19/93), "What is a *chop house*?" (FN/DM/2/3/94), and "What's *enervated* mean?" (FN/DM/3/24/94) illustrate the types of questions students inserted. After such questions were asked, students typically reacted to the response, as in the following exchange:

Alex: What does *craven* mean?

June: Cowardly.

Alex: Really?

Heather: Yeah, she's right. (FN/DM/3/24/94)

Students in Alan's class also spent considerable time talking about the meanings of words. Often times confusion reigned because students did not have the appropriate background knowledge, or they associated words that sounded alike but had widely divergent meanings. One example occurred in the context of a whole-class recitation, where the goal was to converge on a single correct answer to the teacher's question, "What's the Spanish Armada?" Tyrone's response, "It's a country song," was ignored initially. It was only later in face-to-face discussion that the actual reasoning behind the response came out and Tyrone's confusion was given a full airing:

Tyrone: "I thought that was a song. That's the *arma-mada*, right?"

SP: I don't know.

Tyrone: I mean, I know that a country has a song, like "Oh, say can you see" and all that.

SP: That's the national anthem.

Tyrone: It's called the *arma-mada*.

SP: *Arma-mada*. I'll have to check that out. Oh, I know what! I've got it. *Alma Mater*.

Nick: I heard something like that, too.

SP: *Alma Mater*. It's a song, like for the school. (FGI/SP/10/29/93)

Students reported attending to vocabulary during text-based discussions because the words often interfered with their understandings of the passages. This attention to vocabulary seemed to be most highly regarded when the students identified and resolved troublesome words while interacting with each other in their attempts to comprehend assigned texts. Discussions about terms allowed students to confirm appropriate meanings and clarify misconceptions.

Discussion

In this multicase study, adolescents at five research sites engaged in face-to-face interactions to talk about how they experienced discussions of assigned readings in their content area classes. The themes that emerged from these interactions suggest that students are (a) aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to good discussions, (b) knowledgeable about the different tasks and topics that influence their participation, and (c) cognizant of how classroom discussion helps them understand what they read.

By focusing on adolescents' views about their own actions, thoughts, and motives related to classroom talk about texts, we attempted to place students' perspectives on their experiences as discussants at the center of the research. In this way we hoped to make visible how students say they negotiate different roles and relations, rights and responsibilities, and norms and expectations in their discussions of content area texts. We hoped such visibility would enhance instructional and research decision making. Social constructionist thinking provided the framework for studying how students made sense of their experiences as discussants through talking those experiences into being (see Davies, 1993; Green & Dixon, 1994).

Conclusions

As demonstrated in their talk about their experiences in text-based classroom discussions, students focused more on their relations with each other and their commitment to understanding what they read than on their teachers' actions per se. The conditions students believed to be conducive to discussions centered more on mutually exploring ideas than on following teachers' guidelines. Although the adolescents we studied were aware that the tasks teachers presented and the topics they assigned for reading had the potential to influence students' participation in discussions, it was clear that possessing such an awareness did not necessarily bring about compliance. For example, students in Dera's class often ignored her discussion questions when their

own proved more engaging, or they would resist joining in a discussion if it was on a topic they did not like. However, it is important to bear in mind that peer-led small-group discussion was the norm in Dera's room, and thus, it may have been easier for her students to ignore the tasks and topics she assigned. Students were less free to follow their own leads in classrooms where small group discussion was not the norm or where the pace of the curriculum allowed less room for deviation. Even so, students voiced their opinions about unpopular tasks and topics through their words (e.g., offering alternatives to a boring task in Paula's class or recommending that Alan assume responsibility for making dull topics exciting) and through their actions (e.g., maintaining silence when Alan's directions for a task were unclear).

Learning from middle and high school students about their perspectives on conditions conducive to good discussions can provide teachers with crucial information to use in shared decision making. Similar learnings have occurred in recent studies on curriculum decision making in high school English classrooms (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 1994) and on students' perceptions of effective teaching practices (Turley, 1994). And, while many of the implicit and/or explicit recommendations made by students in the present study were also emphasized in Applebee et al. (e.g., the importance of contributing to group talk) and Turley (e.g., the notion of assigning teachers the responsibility for generating student interest in an activity), some were not. For example, in the present study, students generally preferred peer-led small-group discussions to those that were teacher directed and involved the whole class. In Turley's (1994) study of eight high school seniors, the students preferred whole-class settings or individual learning activities to small-group discussions. The potential for being placed in an unproductive group where one student was responsible for all the work made small-group discussions the least favored arrangement in Turley's study. Interestingly, the fear of becoming part of an unproductive group was among the reasons students in the present study gave for believing in the importance of knowing and liking the members of one's group.

The commonalities in students' experiences across the five research sites were greater than the differences. Regardless of variations in their grade level, academic placement, geographical location, and sociocultural setting, the adolescents who were the focus of the five cases in this study demonstrated considerable agreement about what it is they hold each other accountable for and the expectations they have for discussion. Our analysis showed that these students constructed common expectations for text-based discussions and that they valued listening to each other as they expressed their opinions and argued about the meaning of what they read. Furthermore, they demonstrated an aptness for negotiating roles and responsibilities—one that suggests the power of language in both shaping and being shaped by these adolescents' individual social histories.

Research Implications

Several directions for further study are suggested by the findings reported here. In terms of the implications for future research, we see the following as potentially useful

directions. First, the three assertions of the present study need fleshing out. As we worked to gain a sense of the assertions that could be made about students' perceptions of their experiences in text-based discussions across multiple sites, we also attempted to gain a sense of the nuances in each assertion. More work needs to be done in exploring specific voices, perhaps by gathering more contextualized data on some of the focal students (e.g., tracing their steps through their days inside and outside of school). Although collectively the students helped us to understand better the role of peer relations during text-based discussions, we would like to have greater insight into individual students' perspectives. Second, the need exists for research that explores how students' perceptions of their experiences as discussants vary across the disciplines. Although the cases in this study fall within the humanities, or more specifically, the English/-language arts and the social studies, there is some evidence to suggest that discussion plays out differently in mathematics classes (e.g., see Mike's comment on calculus class under the second assertion), and perhaps in other disciplines as well. Third, an interesting question for further research might be how text-based discussions differ from more general discussions. Perhaps students are more likely to "argue" with a book than with their teachers or peers because there is less chance for reprisals or hurt feelings. Fourth, more indepth research is needed to explore students' generalizations about classroom talk (e.g., Nick's statement that shy people talk to other shy people, or Rico's observation that racial and ethnic biases discourage students from participating in small group discussions). Similarly, comments from students that describe outcomes without explaining how they came to be (e.g., Sarah's statement, "We are all just comfortable talking with each other now") need to be explored. A fifth direction for further study involves exploring students' perceptions of the effect of discussion on independent reading strategies. Our students reported positive feelings about the influence of discussion on their ability to understand what teachers directed them to read, but they did not mention how such discussion might affect their free or self-directed reading. We wonder, too, how different reading demands documented in the historical literature on content area reading instruction (Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983) might influence students' perceptions of class discussion.

Classroom Implications

Students' perceptions in this study support some long-held beliefs about the benefits of discussion. Our findings indicate that discussion allows students to become engaged with ideas, to construct meaning, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to negotiate complex cognitive and social relationships. When discussion is a regular part of classroom life, students learn how to work with others, how to "fit in," how to stay focused on a topic, and the importance of listening and contributing to a group effort. However, it is also apparent that what students say and do during discussion is not always congruent with what teachers intend, or with what is reported in research that does not include the student

perspective. If we were to draw one practical implication from our findings, it would be that teachers who use small-group discussion in their classrooms should expect the unexpected. Students have different viewpoints from teachers (and other adult observers) of specific tasks and topics, of their own role in discussions, and the role of others. Students may pursue their own agendas during discussion, different from the teacher's intentions but nevertheless relevant to the content at hand and productive in terms of what they learn.

Looking at discussion in this way may present a fundamental challenge to teachers who are focused on maintaining control over curriculum, class routines, and specific student outcomes. But for teachers who value student independence and self-directed learning, this study offers the following suggestions for facilitating productive small-group discussions:

- Provide students with frequent opportunities to discuss what they read. In short, don't let them be "talk-deprived," as one boy in the present study put it. If this seems to run counter to current curricular goals that argue against deviating from a fast-paced delivery of content, consider contacting the curriculum director or someone else who exercises authority in curriculum decisions. It may be useful to reconsider present curricula in light of what students see as the benefits of discussion in helping them to construct knowledge as a social group.

- Develop a sense of community in the classroom. Students say they like discussion more when they feel comfortable with group members and when they feel they have something in common with others. Teachers can foster a sense of community by setting a good example of courtesy and respect, acknowledging the diverse contributions of class members, emphasizing common goals, and pointing out the benefits of cooperation.

- Attend to group dynamics. From the present study, it appears that students are likely to try out new ideas when group dynamics foster mutual respect and understanding among members. Because the productivity of group members seems to outweigh the importance of personal friendships, be explicit about the importance of contributing to the discussion, listening to others, being tolerant, and staying on the topic.

- Build on students' keen sense of the conditions that foster good discussion from their perspectives. Use class time occasionally to let students evaluate their discussions.

- Moderate, don't dominate. Students can and will direct their own productive discussions. Teachers can facilitate this by setting up the conditions for a discussion, but then they should step back and let students work with minimal interference.

- Search for topics that engage students. Their opinions about suitable discussion topics suggest the need for students to have a voice in selecting and defining them. Students' perceptions of their experiences with discussion tasks seem to suggest that topic

is more important than task when it comes to eliciting their participation in discussions.

Limitations

The study was designed to learn from students' perspectives how they experience text-based discussions in their content area classes. Taking into account Erickson and Shultz's (1992) claim that it is the student's voice that has been most conspicuously absent in the research on student experience, we focused on what students had to say. In doing so, certain qualifications in interpreting the data must be acknowledged. First, we assume that students' knowledge of their past and present experiences as discussants was inseparable from the language they used to reflect that knowledge. To the extent that this assumption was supported, students appear to have sophisticated and well-articulated understandings of the nature of classroom talk about texts.

Second, we assume that the presence of outsiders changed what happened in our classroom research sites, although we think we were present frequently enough to eliminate some of this influence. Nonetheless, we recognize that by asking questions of students, we influenced the way they "saw" their classrooms and their actions within those classrooms. This changed way of "seeing" is, in turn, apt to have affected at least some of their actions.

Third, although a multicase study design enabled us to examine a range of students' experiences across diverse settings, the fact remains that one of the cases (Esther's class) was not studied as intensively or as long as the other four cases. In addition, two of the classrooms did not engage in peer-led discussions to the extent that the other three did.

Fourth, the decision to enlist several focal students at each of the five sites to ensure a rich and varied set of perspectives limited the degree to which we could explore in depth how any one individual went about constructing his or her encounters with the discussion process. No doubt this limitation seriously reduced what we might have learned about the subjectivities of a single student at each of the sites.

Fifth, although we made considerable effort to understand students' points of view, we still were limited to our own ways of interpreting their words. We think our collaboration has strengthened our ability to see and to understand—especially since some of us are from inside the classroom and some of us from outside—but we know that there may be other ways of hearing and interpreting students' words.

Summary

Our multicase study supports the importance of listening to students. Their words suggest much about their social lives and histories in and out of school, their insights into classroom talk about texts, and their understanding of their own roles as participants in small- and large-group discussions. They know each others' roles, too, and hold each other accountable for fairness in their participation. Students expect to learn from discussions and are quite disappointed when a discussion is designed in a way that seems less than productive to them. As we listened to their words, we

realized how helpful their comments were to our own perceptions of text-based discussions, and, in a larger sense, to our understandings of negotiation, position, and ways of participating. We realized too that we wanted to hear more, and we plan more studies to do so.

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APPENDIX

Narrative Vignette
(Written after the first two months of the study)

Across cycles of events, the focal students in Patricia's room believe that peer-led small-group discussions work when all individuals in the group do their part, rather than rely on one or two people to carry the load. Interestingly, "doing your part" seems to relate directly to whether or not you talk. Simply doing the work individually and writing down individual answers does not count. For example, after viewing a videotaped discussion (VT/10/26/93) on the day Patricia's students began working on group reports related to their study of the Middle East, Jennifer announced, "I think my group doesn't work together very well because they don't say anything, and I feel like I do all the work" (FGI/KH/11/4/93, p. 1). And, on another day, as students viewed a videotaped discussion (VT/KH/12/9/23) involving a review of vocabulary (they had to use the words to make a story about Russia's history through the early 1900s), Jennifer complained that Elaine didn't say anything:

> See, look. She writes stuff down, but she doesn't say anything. 'Cause every time I would write down a word, she would cross it out, but she wouldn't say anything. Then, Mrs. Z. [Patricia] would come over and say let someone else say something, and she still wouldn't say anything. (FGI/KH/12/9/93, p. 11)

When Kathleen asked the focal students what she would have to do if she were in the tenth grade at MHS and was put in their group, Joseph replied, "Do your part." The other students chimed in with "Uh, huh," and Justin added, "Put some effort in, instead of just sitting there saying, 'What is your answer?' or 'What did you get?'" (FGI/KH/11/4/93, p.9).

During the first two months of the study, focal students appear divided in their beliefs about the importance of having the right to select their own group members. Although some felt they would feel responsible for each other and would share ideas better if they had a choice about group membership, others seemed content to work in the groups the teacher formed for them. For example, Jennifer noted that one reason why members of her group who worked on the Middle East project did not talk to one another and did not try to help each other was that they were not compatible. In her words: "I think if we can pick who we would like to work with, it would be better. I don't like the people I work with" (FGI/KH/11/4/93, p. 2). At a later point in the interview, Jennifer returned to the issue of how discussion groups were formed:

> Like our teacher, she just puts us in these groups, like because she didn't want the main people she knows that were, to work together, and I think if she would let us pick our own groups, we would pick the people that we know can work together. I know, even if it were people that were outsiders, like we picked each other, you know, I mean like then we knew we had to get the project done, and we could all say since we were friends, come on we have to do this. (FGI, KH/11/4/93, pp. 7-8)

Tammy, however, did not feel that group participation depended on being with one's friends. In her words: "I think that we motivated each other because like with [. . . .] we used like come on guys we have to get this done, you know, and everything" (FGI/KH/11/4/93, p. 7).

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